

Which Austin-area ZIP codes have the most coronavirus cases and why

By Julie Chang

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The coronavirus pandemic is battering communities of color in Central Texas at a disproportionately higher rate, highlighting disparities in health care access that have long plagued the region.

In the ZIP codes with the most COVID-19 cases per capita in a four-county region — Travis, Williamson, Hays and Bastrop counties — 61% of residents are minorities, 18% lack health insurance and residents have the lowest average median income when compared with ZIP codes that have fared better in the pandemic, according to an analysis by the American-Statesman.

For at least a month, 78741, which includes the East Riverside and Montopolis communities, has consistently had the most residents test positive for COVID-19. As of Friday, 266 of the region's 3,612 cases were documented in the ZIP code. Dozens of the 78741 cases are from Riverside Nursing Home, residents' relatives told the Statesman. Seventy percent of 78741 residents are minorities, most of them Hispanic; 25% of them do not have health insurance; and the median annual income there is \$42,000.

The ZIP code with the next-highest tally is 78744, which includes the Dove Springs neighborhood in Southeast Austin and has demographics similar to 78741's. As of Friday, 78744 had 207 cases. The ZIP code does not have a nursing home.

Austin-area COVID-19 cases by ZIP code

Neighborhoods in ZIP codes east of Interstate 35 have higher numbers of COVID-19 cases compared with those in the west. The eastern crescent also has higher concentrations of minority, low-income and uninsured residents.

Sources: Austin Public Health, Williamson County and Cities Health District, Hays County Local Health Department, Bastrop County and U.S. Census Bureau. Information is up to date as of May 22.

The outcomes in the eastern parts of Austin are not surprising, more than a dozen residents, activists, medical experts and policy makers who live or work in the area told the Statesman. They attribute the disproportionate burden of communities most affected by COVID-19, many of them east of Interstate 35, to a variety of factors, including:

- Many residents are essential workers who could not work from home during the peak of the virus.
- Residents live in apartment complexes or multigenerational households where disease can more easily spread. Among the ZIP codes with the most cases, 44% of homes are multifamily units — almost 2½ times the rate of ZIP codes with the fewest cases.
- Residents fear that getting tested for coronavirus could expose their immigration status.
- The communities haven't received culturally sensitive educational material about the disease, in part because of the lack of adequate internet access.
- The populations have high rates of existing chronic disease and poor access to health care services.

"There's a poverty pocket here. You have a lot of the people who work in restaurants, fast food, H-E-B, health care — they are the essential workers. But they're also the most vulnerable population," said Susana Almanza, a Montopolis resident and the head of the environmental and social justice group People Organized in Defense of Earth and Her Resources (PODER). "We were already being impacted with so many inequities, and the coronavirus comes along, and that just aggravates the inequity that we've been confronted with all this time."

City officials have provided COVID-19 resources in Spanish online and in community gathering places. The city held a town hall in Spanish, as well as offering media interviews and public service announcements in Spanish. Interpreters are available via 311 to help with completing forms and accessing resources. Health officials also have spoken with community leaders to help disseminate information about preventing the spread of COVID-19.

Austin Public Health plans to develop a task force with a team of community members to respond to COVID-19 disparities.

"We have some ZIP codes that we have been following and have noticed that there are some disparities, and they are the same ZIP codes where we see health disparities outside of the COVID-19 response," Austin Public Health Director Stephanie Hayden said in a statement. "We are absolutely going to do everything we can to improve the health amongst our Latinx community."

RELATED: Travis County has 'flattened the curve,' but Hispanics still suffering in pandemic

'The disease is horrible'

When the shelter-in-place directive went into effect in March, 60-year-old Abel Salazar, a resident of 78741, knew that working from home was never going to be an option. He juggles two jobs — caring for residents at an assisted living facility and cleaning a doctor's office — and must work to provide for his family.

He started feeling sick three weeks into the pandemic, losing his sense of taste and feeling pain in his eyes. He tested positive after visiting a CommUnityCare Health Centers clinic 6 miles away. Days later his wife tested positive and then his son, both of whom presumably contracted it from Salazar. It took the family about four weeks to recover.

His wife, Maria Socorro Felix de Salazar, whose diabetes and high blood pressure put her at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19, said she wouldn't wish the experience on anyone.

"The truth is I was very afraid I was going to die," the 50-year-old said in Spanish. "It's an ugly experience. That disease is horrible."

Unlocking trends seen in Austin-area ZIP codes with the most to least COVID-19 cases

Dividing ZIP codes into groups — from those with the top 25% rates of infection to the bottom 25% — allows certain trends to become clearer. Residents in ZIPs with the most COVID-19 cases per capita, the top quartile, are more likely to be minorities, have lower incomes, live in multifamily housing and lack health insurance.

COVID-19 cases per 100,000 residents

Percentage of non-white residents

Percentage of uninsured residents

Average median income

Percentage of multifamily homes

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; health departments of Travis, Williamson, Hays and Bastrop counties as of May 22

Essential workers like the Salazars are being exposed to the disease at a higher rate. At one construction site, 26 workers tested positive for the disease this month, according to CommUnityCare, which conducted the tests.

Council Member Sabino “Pio” Renteria, who represents the area, said Gov. Greg Abbott should not have allowed businesses and construction to reopen as early as he did without ensuring that workers were properly protected. He said low-income minorities feel even more compelled to work because they don’t have paid sick leave.

“A lot of these workers, even if they’re sick, they’ll show up to work. They can’t afford not to work. They live paycheck to paycheck, and that’s what really frightens me more than anything else,” Renteria said.

RELATED: Family of health care worker who died of coronavirus sues nursing home

Disproportionately afflicted

More than half of those who tested positive in Travis County are Hispanic, even though they make up a little more than a third of the population. Forty-eight percent of hospitalizations were Hispanic patients.

Officials with CommUnityCare, whose vast majority of patients are low-income minorities and lack health insurance, also report disparities among their testing results. Of all non-Hispanics tested from mid-March to May 15 for whom symptom status was documented, 7% who had symptoms tested positive and 5% of those who were asymptomatic tested positive. Among Hispanics, those rates were four times and two times that of their non-Hispanic counterparts.

“When we look at disease burden from a chronic disease process, our patients, uninsured or lower income, are at a higher risk or have a higher burden. Immunocompromised folks with comorbid chronic diseases are at higher risk for adverse outcomes from infection with coronavirus,” said Jaeson Fournier, chief executive officer of CommUnityCare, adding that disease disparities in Travis County are not as large as in other parts of Texas.

Compared with Austin communities west of I-35, eastern crescent communities have higher rates of heart disease, diabetes, blood pressure, high cholesterol and asthma, by as much as 4 percentage points, according to a 2018 study by CommUnityCare. They also have lower rates of preventive care and higher rates of obesity.

East Austin residents should not be blamed for their poorer health outcomes, health experts say. Systemic racism over generations has forced minorities across the country, including in Austin, to live in communities without healthy food choices and nearby health care or adequate public transportation to access them. These communities are often close to sources of high pollution — I-35 for the 78741 community, for example — and are plagued by unsafe conditions that prevent residents from exercising outdoors.

“Layered on top of this is the discrimination that people of color experience when they try to engage with the health care system,” said Dr. Elizabeth Matsui, director of clinical and translational research at the University of Texas Dell Medical School. “And all of that makes for a very potent mix for increasing the risk of developing a host of chronic diseases ... COVID and of having poor outcomes.”

Statesman Survey: What stories do you want to see about the coronavirus pandemic?

We are asking Austin-area residents to give us tips about stories and investigations related to the coronavirus pandemic and the local, state and federal response to it. Please consider filling out and sharing this form.

What is your tip?

Your answer

Have you heard of any businesses, nursing homes, public facilities or other entities with employees or patrons who have been infected by the coronavirus? If so, please explain.

Isolated and vulnerable

The lack of health insurance in low-income, high-minority neighborhoods also increases the burden. Some residents work in jobs that don't offer insurance. They might make too much money to qualify for Medicaid but too little to qualify for tax credits to help purchase health insurance through the federal government.

The problem is further exacerbated in the immigrant community. The Trump administration has enacted rules that would make it more difficult for immigrants to achieve legal status if they take advantage of public services, such as Medicaid and food stamps.

Locally, the chilling effect from various anti-immigration policies discourages people from seeking care, although clinics do not ask for immigration status when testing people for COVID-19, Fournier said. "Because that's none of our business, frankly."

Jill Ramirez, president of the Latino Healthcare Forum, which is based in 78741, said immigrants are "so afraid to access any resources. They've been told that Immigration is keeping an eye on you."

Curbing growth

Also contributing to high COVID-19 caseloads in low-income communities is the lack of free masks. Almanza's organization, PODER, has distributed hundreds of free masks donated by community members to people in the Montopolis area. PODER and the Montopolis Neighborhood Association set up shop outside high-traffic retailers Dollar Tree and Tomgro Grocery to give away the masks.

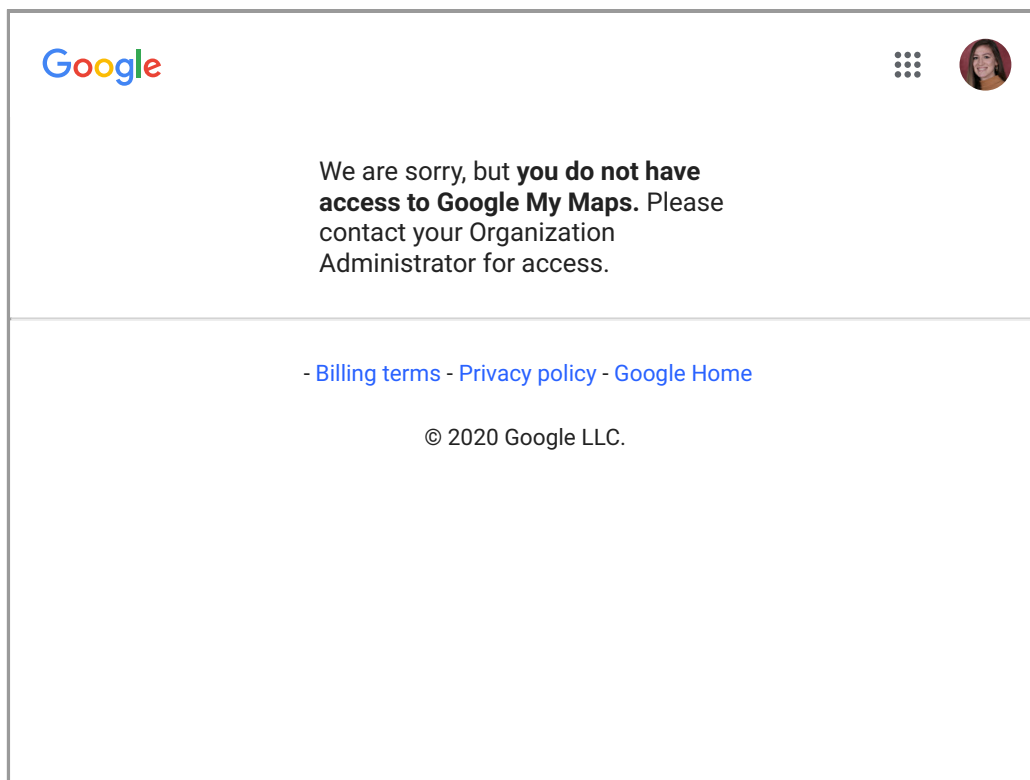
While she is grateful that her neighbors have stepped up to the plate, Ana Villalobos with the Montopolis Neighborhood Association wishes government officials could do more to provide masks to vulnerable communities.

“Our local representatives just don’t care,” Villalobos said. “Montopolis — we’re just sitting around here waiting for leftovers.”

Villalobos also is calling for culturally sensitive and accurately translated educational material about COVID-19. Reaching communities of color and low-income residents is particularly challenging because many do not have adequate access to the internet, preventing them from understanding the prevalence of the disease in their communities, how to access resources and how to protect themselves.

Because of the struggles that minority communities face, health experts believe the number of COVID-19 cases is especially undercounted in the eastern crescent.

Half as many testing sites are in eastern Travis County as in the west — 10 vs. 21, according to a Statesman analysis of state health department data. CommUnityCare runs nearly half of the eastern testing sites, which are open a few days a week. Two of the eastern testing sites are in the wealthier Mueller neighborhood.



“We know that COVID-19 cases are grossly underreported nationally and in Texas. We know that poor communities and black and brown communities always suffer disproportionately, and so if you’re already having trouble accessing health care before the pandemic, it’s not necessarily magically going to open up for you,” said Karen Johnson, an associate professor at the University of Texas School of Nursing.

Guadalupe Zamora, a longtime physician to East Austin residents who has had 12 patients test positive for COVID-19, said the vulnerable community might become unhealthier in other areas because of the pandemic.

He has seen a 50% drop in patients because people are afraid to visit their doctors, where they believe they have a higher chance of contracting the virus.

Zamora pleads with his patients to socially distance but says if they're feeling ill, they need to come see him.

"They're just afraid to come in, and they're coming in sicker because they're waiting," Zamora said.

"We prefer the patients when they get sick to come in early because it's easier to treat. But when they get bronchitis or pneumonia, especially COVID, it becomes much more difficult to treat."

Staff editor Alejandro Martínez-Cabrera contributed to this report.